

Tightropes & High-wires: Balancing Love and Fear

Kris Cervantes, 3 August 2014

In “The Gift of Fear,” author Gavin de Becker says, “True fear is a gift. Unwarranted fear is a curse. Learn to tell the difference.”

All of us walk a tightrope from ignorance to love over a chasm of fear every day. The tightrope is made up of courage, denial, good intentions, ignorance, and most of all, faith that the world is not, inherently, bad - that people, in fact, are inherently good. Even when our faith wavers, those of us who have chosen this particular religious path of Unitarian Universalism try to come back to our first principle, that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

But courage, denial, good intentions, ignorance and faith don't mean the chasm isn't there, or that our fears aren't sometimes justified. There really are monsters out there in the dark, even if they are outnumbered by a factor of a thousand by good, decent, loving people.

What happens when we lose faith in the inherent worth and dignity of others? What happens when we begin to let the fear rise up and swamp us? When we let fear define our faith, rather than using faith to defy our fear, we begin seeing the monsters everywhere - often where there are no monsters at all.

When we see monsters everywhere, we begin to act out of fear, which leads to hatred.

In the same book, de Becker says, “A person who is seeking to feel justification for some action might move from ‘What you’ve done angers me’ to ‘What you’ve done is wrong.’ Popular justifications include the moral high ground of righteous indignation and the more simple equation known by its biblical name: an eye for an eye.”

How many of you read or heard about the events that took place at First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans two Sundays ago? For those who didn't hear, and as a recap, here's what happened.

Operation Save America, a pro-life organization which arrived in New Orleans to protest the building of a Planned Parenthood health clinic, apparently didn't have enough to do on Sunday, July 20th, so they showed up at First Church Unitarian Universalist of New Orleans for the service. During a moment of silence in memory of members who had passed away recently, the visitors suddenly began accosting the minister and congregants, telling them they were not a true faith, exhorting them to repent, and so on. An Operation Save America webpage puts quotations marks around the words “church” and “pastor” when referring to First UU, and refers to the church building as a “synagogue of Satan.”

The congregation reacted appropriately; the Reverend Deanna Vandiver, a frequent guest speaker who almost certainly got more than she bargained for when she took the job that Sunday - invited the protestors to either participate respectfully in the service, or leave. The congregation began singing and the most disruptive visitors were escorted out by church leaders. Some of the Operation Save America folks stayed quietly, and after the service they state that they engaged in conversation with congregants. Those who had been escorted out walked around the church to the nursery windows, where they pressed anti-abortion posters against the glass and screamed at the infants, toddlers, and nursery workers. The nursery workers picked up the children and moved to an interior room. They even remembered to put a note on the nursery door for parents, telling them of the room change.

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Almost exactly six years ago - July 27th, 2008 - Jim David Adkisson walked into the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church and opened fire, killing two and wounding seven others. It happened during a Sunday morning performance by the church's children and youth. There were 200 people there to see the program. Special mention should be made of 60-year-old church usher Greg McKendry, who lost his life when he deliberately positioned himself in front of Adkisson to protect others. Also notable were church members John Bohstedt, Robert Birdwell, Arthur Bolds, and Terry Uselton and visitor Jamie Parkey, who restrained Adkisson until the police arrived just minutes later.

I don't know about you, but I don't ever want to have my name mentioned in a Wikipedia article on either side of such events. I wouldn't mind being the minister who asked obnoxious people to leave - I hope I would have the grace and wit to respond as well as First Church New Orleans and the Reverend Deanna Vandiver did, rather than standing here with my mouth open, or using a series of unprintable words in response.

I don't understand Jim David Adkisson; I don't understand anyone who would enter a church service and scream epithets at those in attendance. I don't *want* to understand them. I can feel pity for them, and for their families, and I can feel compassion for them, even, when I'm calm and rational and using my best non-judgmental heart.

But what I really want to know - really, truly - is, how would we respond if either kind of event took place here, within these walls?

I've worked at a college for the past six years, and part of every single professional development day has been "active shooter education": what we should do if that nightmare scenario ever takes place on our campus. I have a plan, in fact, for how I should act and what I should do. I *hate*

that I have a plan, but I suspect that if worse came to worst, I would hate *not* having a plan even more.

I think it is part of our responsibility as a loving, caring, smart community of people to have plans in place for these kinds of events, from the mundane and annoying to the potentially life-threatening. I hate that I think we should have those plans in place. But I think if worse came to worst, we would hate not having those plans in place even more.

The sad fact is, there are those who never figured out how to walk the high wire away from ignorance, over fear, toward love. They somehow got stuck down in the fear, and it motivates all they say and all they do. They forgot or can't hear the words of Martin Luther King, who said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

In "Life of Pi," Yann Martel says, "[Fear] is life's only true opponent. Only fear can defeat life. It is a clever, treacherous adversary... It has no decency, respects no law or convention, shows no mercy. It goes for your weakest spot, which it finds with unnerving ease. It begins in your mind, always ... so you must fight hard to express it. You must fight hard to shine the light of words upon it. Because if you don't, if your fear becomes a wordless darkness that you avoid, perhaps even manage to forget, you open yourself to further attacks of fear because you never truly fought the opponent who defeated you."

By speaking of my fear for this place of ours, this sanctuary and sacred space, I am not giving in to my fear, but confronting it. I invite you to confront that fear as well. Conversations about these scary ideas aren't comfortable, they aren't fun, they aren't uplifting - now. But conversations in which we shed light on these fears, face them, and even plan for them, allow us to hold true to our principles later. Like our

Covenant of Right Relations, any plans we make for such worst-case scenarios aren't needed when the sun is shining and the path is smooth.

I believe that the members of Operation Save America who gate-crashed a church service in New Orleans acted out of unspoken fears which have turned to hate - fear of change, fear that the disenfranchised might gain or regain their power, fear that babies will die - the only fear of theirs with which I can sympathize, even if I think it's misplaced and scientifically wrong. I believe that Jim David Adkisson acted out of fear of progress and change on that Sunday morning in 2008 at the Tennessee Valley UU Church.

I have fears, too, but I hope I will never let them be my primary motivator. I hope that we, as a community of faith, will continue to walk our tightrope of faith over the chasm of fear, inviting others to join us in respecting each person's inherent worth and dignity. And I hope that we will strengthen our safety net with intentional, rational, thoughtful, non-fear-based plans for the rough times, so if we do have dark days, we are guided to meet them with love and courage, as best we can, together.

I'd like to close by revisiting a Maya Angelou poem I read in a different service, in a different context, a few months ago. The poem is called, "Touched by an Angel."

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies

old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.